

By Frank Zeller

A Buddhist group banned in Vietnam has said police in the communist country have tried to evict its monks from a pagoda to use it for a UN-sponsored international Buddhist meeting this month.

The state-backed Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) on May 13-17 hosts the 5th United Nations Day of the Vesak conference, which is expected to draw thousands of followers and scholars from 70 to 100 countries, according to organisers.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), which is outlawed but still runs scores of pagodas here, has said its members have been harassed and threatened by authorities seeking to bring them under communist state control.

The UBCV claims police and state officials on April 29 broke the locks of the group's Giac Hai pagoda in southern Lam Dong province, claimed it for use during the UN Vesak events, and temporarily detained its monks.

“Police interrogated the two monks for over three hours, accusing them of belonging to an ‘illegal organisation,’ engaging in ‘political activities’ and ‘disturbing public order,’” said a UBCV statement issued in Paris on Saturday.

The group said the pagoda's head monk Thich Tri Khai had been singled out in a “state-orchestrated policy of repression” against the UBCV, which is led by Thich Quang Do, winner of Norway's 2006 Rafto Foundation human rights award.

Police in Don Duong district, where the pagoda is located, could not immediately be reached for comment.

The UBCV has also claimed that 300 uniformed and plainclothes police on April 1 surrounded its Phuoc Hue pagoda in central Quang Tri province, threw head monk Thich Tu Giao to the ground and vandalised the interior.

The United Nations in 1999 decided to celebrate Vesak, an event that marks the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha Gautama, and held the first celebrations in May the following year at UN headquarters in New York.

The event has been hosted by Thailand since 2004, but this year marks the first time Vietnam has been chosen as the host country for the event, set to be Vietnam's largest-ever religious meeting.

More than 50 cities across Vietnam will host events for the conferences, organised under the theme of "Buddhist Contribution to Building a Just, Democratic and Civilised Society," Vietnamese state media has reported.

Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, one of the world's most prominent Buddhist teachers, has already arrived in Vietnam to take part.

Hanh, a life-long peace activist, was barred from Vietnam by both the former southern regime and the post-1975 communist government and has since built an international following from his "Plum Village" monastery in France.

Known as "Thay" (master) to his followers, he made two return trips to his homeland in recent years that were criticised by the UBCV, whose leaders charged that Hanoi was using his visits for propaganda purposes.

The UBCV's patriarch Thich Quang Do wrote in a recent statement: "How ironic it is that only communists and foreigners will be free to celebrate the Vesak, whilst we independent Buddhists will be absent from the scene?"

Vietnam says it respects freedom of religion, as long as groups do not engage in political activism. The one-party state requires all religious groups to register with the government.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom on Friday recommended to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to place Vietnam back onto a global blacklist of religious freedom violators.

Vietnam was taken off the list days before a visit by President George W. Bush to Hanoi in late 2006 for bilateral talks and a summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

The commission's report said some Buddhists and Protestants in Vietnam "are often harassed, beaten, detained, arrested and discriminated against and they continue to face some efforts to coerce renunciation of faith."